

The Dangers of Earbuds and Headphones

Earbuds and music headphones have become fixtures of everyday life, but on the job, they can pose serious safety hazards. What feels like a harmless habit can put you and the people around you at risk. When you cannot hear what is happening around you, you lose the ability to react to warnings, moving equipment and instructions from co-workers. The consequences can be severe. Knowing the risks is the first step to making smarter choices on the job.

Why Are Earbuds and Headphones a Safety Concern?

One of your most important safety tools is your situational awareness, which means paying attention to your surroundings and recognizing hazards before they become dangerous. Wearing earbuds or music headphones can reduce your ability to do that.

Potential risks include:

- Not hearing moving vehicles, machinery or equipment
- Missing emergency alarms or evacuation announcements
- Not hearing verbal warnings, instructions or communication from co-workers
- Becoming distracted and losing focus on the task at hand
- Increasing the chance of slips, trips, falls, struck-by incidents or caught-in hazards
- Making it harder to communicate effectively with others
- Contributing to hearing damage when music is played at high volumes
- Getting wired earbuds or headphone cords caught in equipment, tools or machinery

Even in workplaces that seem relatively quiet, unexpected hazards can develop quickly. Maintaining full awareness of your surroundings helps protect both you and your co-workers.

Earbuds Are Not Hearing Protection

It is important to understand that consumer earbuds and music headphones are not a substitute for approved hearing protection. Consumer earbuds and headphones, whether noise-canceling or not, can block the warning sounds workers depend on to stay safe.

If your job requires hearing protection, use only the equipment provided or approved by your employer. Workplace hearing protection, such as earplugs and earmuffs, is specifically designed and tested to reduce noise exposure and is assigned a noise reduction rating (NRR) based on laboratory testing. The NRR indicates how much noise reduction a device achieved under ideal lab conditions, and real-world protection is often significantly lower depending on fit and usage. Consumer earbuds and music headphones do not undergo this type of occupational safety testing and should never be used in place of required hearing protection.

Your Ears Help Keep You Safe

Your ability to hear is an important part of staying safe at work. The sounds around you provide valuable information that can help you identify hazards and react quickly in an emergency. If you cannot fully hear and respond to your surroundings, you may be putting yourself and others at risk. Remember, always follow your employer's rules regarding earbuds and headphones and stay alert to your surroundings.